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Maharaja Hem Chandra : A Profile

Hem Chandra, known to history by his short name Hemu,¹ is undoubtedly one of the most remarkable figures in the history of medieval India. There are few stories in fact and fiction that can rival the breath-taking acts of heroism and gallantry and unparalleled feats of daring and adventure of Hemu. Besides that, he displayed remarkable genius for business management, politics and civil government and thus towered above all his contemporaries.

Hem Chandra was a native of Rewari,² a prominent town in Haryana, nearly 50 miles south-west of Delhi. His father's name was Puran Das and he was Dhusar by caste. Puran Das was essentially a religious man. The worldly life had no attraction for him.³

When Hemu was still in his teens, Puran left his home and went to Brindaban (Mathura). He became a disciple of Swami Hit Harivansha, the founder of the Radha Vallabha sect. We learn from a contemporary book *Rasik Ananya Mal* by Bhagwat Mudit (pp. 34-45) that Puran Das had secured for himself an enviable position among the disciples of Hit Harivansha by dint of his ability

1. He is known by various names, such as Hemu, Hemraj, Hem Chandra and Vasant Rai (*Dalpat Vilas*, p. 10).

2. Motilal Bhargava (*Hemu aur us ka Yuga*, p. 10) and Rahul Sankratiyana (*Akbar*, pp. 4-5) have wrongly supposed that Hemu was not a native of Rewari. The former says that he lived at Deoti Macheri (Alwar) and the latter puts him at Sahasram in Bihar. For a detailed discussion and criticism of their views see my book, *Ahirwal ka Itihas*, p. 33.

3. *Ibid.*

and devotion. He toured from place to place preaching the teachings of the Vallabha sect.⁴

The absence of Puran Das from home had a very adverse effect on the life of his family. Thier financial position became very hopeless. Consequently Hemu left his studies and took to huckestry to support his family. He sold salt in the streets of Rewari.⁵ After some time his position improved and he left huckestry and became a weighman in the *mandi*.⁶

Almost all the contemporary and semi-contemporary authors believe that Hemu was a very intelligent man. Besides that, he was hard working and painstaking too.⁷ Gifted with these two traits, Hemu soon overcame his financial difficulties. When his position improved a little he left Rewari and went to Delhi, the imperial capital and became a weighman there. It was here that his knowledge of trade and commerce improved. He studied the complex business problems very seriously.

But the weighman's job could not hold ambitious Hemu for a long time. He soon changed it for a government job and became a hawker⁸. Diligent and intelligent, Hemu pleased his superiors with his fine performance. Consequently he was soon promoted to the rank of a government contractor.⁹

The new post, in fact, opened the gates of success for Hemu. As a royal contractor he began to come in contact with some of the highest officials of the state. These officials were impressed

4. He went as far as Thattah in Sind. Here he converted Parmanand, the Governor of this place, to the Radha Vallabh sect in 1592 vik. (=1635 A.D.).

5. Abul Fazl, *Akbar Nama* (tr. by Beveridge) vol. I., p. 617.

6. Niamatullah, *Tarikh-i-Khan Jahani wa Makhjan-i-Afghani*, ed. Imam-ul-din, vol. I, p. 391.

7. Even a hostile author Abul Fazl praises him for his intelligence and diligence. See *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 617.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Ishwari Prasad, *Life and times of Humayun*, p. 19.



Courtesy : Rahul Sankrityayana

HEM CHANDRA (HEMU)

by the work of Hemu. So highly did they all speak of him that even the King Islam Shah Suri had to take note of him. In fact, his rise to prominence starts from this place.

Rise to Prominence

Islam Shah developed a special liking for intelligent and sincere Hemu. Besides being a royal contractor, he became the king's personal adviser also. The king sought his advice not only in matters relative to trade and commerce but also in those pertaining to diplomacy and statesmanship.¹⁰

It is a well-known fact that the financial condition of the Afghan empire deteriorated during Islam Shah's time. In order to check it he appointed Hemu to the post of *Shahana-i-Bazar*.¹¹ This was a very important post in the Afghan empire. It was he who managed the mercantile system of the State. He used to inspect and examine all the important commodities. He also prepared rate-lists and inspected weights, etc.¹²

This rank, no doubt, further elevated the position of Hemu and hundreds and thousands of the rich and influential traders bowed down before him. Besides that, he got an opportunity to pay frequent visits to the King (Islam Shah) in order to apprise him of the trade and commerce situation in the country.¹³

After a few years, Hemu was appointed to the post of the Chief of Intelligence and Daroga-i-Chauki¹⁴ (Superintendent of Post). The efficiency of espionage in Islam Shah's reign was due to Hemu's ceaseless efforts. He remained at this post till Islam Shah's death (Oct. 30, 1553).¹⁵

10. *Tabqat-i-Akbari* (Tr. De.), vol. II, p. 198.

11. Rahim, *History of the Afghans in India*, p. 49.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*

14. Qanungo, p. 441.

15. See *Ahmrval ka Itihas*, pp. 34-35.

Adil Shah and Hemu

Adil Shah who became king after killing the infant son and successor of Islam Shah, on November 2, 1553, also held Hemu in great esteem. Indolent, pleasure-seeking, sensual king Adil made Hemu his Prime Minister and entrusted him with the administration of the kingdom.¹⁶

Since Adil Shah was a weak ruler, a host of Afghan chiefs revolted against him. In the words of Abul Fazl: "Ahmed Khan Sur...who had charge of the Punjab became a claimant for the sovereignty and styled himself Sikandar Khan. And Mohammad Khan...the Governor of Bengal aimed at general supremacy. Ibrahim Khan Sur...set about obtaining the rule of India, while Shujat Khan...raised his head high in Malwa. The vagabond Afghans gathered together and caused confusion."¹⁷

At this critical juncture Hemu came to defend the falling fortunes of the Afghan Empire. He fought as many as twenty-two battles with the rebel chiefs and defeated them.¹⁸

After some time Adil became insane. During his insanity Hemu used to rule like a king. But it did not go long and Adil recovered from this illness after a short while. After his recovery Adil tried to snatch back the supreme authority which had slipped into the hands of Hemu during his illness. This might have offended Hemu and he imprisoned Adil. A contemporary Rajasthani book *Dalpat Vilas*¹⁹ says that Adil remained practically a prisoner in the jail at Kalinjir for some time. Mushtaqi also testifies this fact: "Hemu became all powerful. He did not give any thing except food to Adil Shah. He seized treasures and elephants and the

16. Bayazid Biyat, p. 212; Delaet, p. 140; Abul Fazl, vol. 1, pp. 617-18; Shrivastava, *Akbar the Great*, vol. 1 p. 24; Rahul, p. 6; Tripathi, *Rise and fall of the Mughal Empire*, p. 158; Smith, *Akbar, the Great Moghul*, p. 26.

17. Abul Fazl, vol. 1, pp. 618-19.

18. For details see my book, *Ahirwal ka Itihas*, pp. 35-36.

19. p. 6.

whole country came under his sway. He appointed his own men everywhere and the reins of Government slipped away from Adil Shah's hands."²⁰ A perusal of the contemporary accounts can help us to suppose that Adil might have promised not to interfere in Hemu's affairs for his release. This fact is confirmed by Abul Fazl (vol. 1, pp. 617-18): "Nothing remained to Mubariz Khan (Adil Shah), who was commonly known as Adli (tyrant), except the name of the king; Hemu undertook all appointments and dismissals and the distribution of justice."

Humayun returns

Humayun occupied the Panjab and Haryana in July, 1555. But fate did not help him to rule this country for a long time and he died on January 26, 1556 of an accidental fall from his library. His son Akbar was away in Panjab then and he rushed up towards Delhi and Agra when this news reached him.²¹

Hemu and Akbar

Like Akbar Hemu also rushed up to occupy Agra, Delhi and the adjoining territory. At Agra Hemu was expected to meet tough opposition at the hands of Sikandar Khan Uzbek. But the latter was so much terrorized by the news of Hemu's attack on him that he fled way to Delhi and Hemu occupied Agra without any opposition.²²

Next Hemu attacked Delhi.²³ He had with him then 50,000 cavalry, 1,000 elephants, 51 big and 500 small guns, besides a large infantry.²⁴ When the Mughals heard of this attack they became utterly nervous, but some of their commanders inspired them to fight. Consequently on 7th October 1556 both the armies fought.

20. *Waqiat-i-Mustaqil*. f. 74 I am grateful to Shri R.K. Bhardwaj for this information.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

22. Badaoni, vol. 1, p. 433; Ahmed Yadgar, *Tarikh-i-Salatih-i-Afghana*, pp. 348-50; Niamatullah (Darn's tr.), p. 154.

23. Badaoni, vol. 1, p. 13; Nizam-ud-din, vol. II, p. 129.

24. Abul Fazl, vol. II, p. 47.

Afghan army was led by Hemu and his assistants were Shadi Khan of Sambhal, Hazikhan of Alwar and Rai Husain Jalwani. On the Mughals' side Tardibegh was the chief commander. His assistants were Afzal Khan, Ashraf Khan, Maulana Mir Mohammad Sherwani, Hyder Mohammad Khan, Iskandar Khan, Abdullah Uzbeg, etc.²⁵ Hemu's army fought ferociously and defeated the Mughals. Hemu captured 160 elephants 1,000 Arabian horses and a huge treasure.²⁶

Hemu assumes sovereign rank

Victorious Hemu entered into Delhi with great pomp and show. It was truly a great event and had great effect on Hemu. He thought, to quote the words of Smith, "his sovereign was a long way off, that he himself was in possession of the army and elephants, and that it might be better to gain a kingdom for his own benefit rather than for his absent employer."²⁷

In order to materialize his intention to assume the sovereign rank, Hemu distributed the spoils collected from Agra and Delhi among his Afghan soldiers and officers and won them over to his side. After that he raised an imperial canopy over his head and exercised "the most cherished privilege of sovereignty by striking coins in his own name." He assumed the title of Maharaja Vikramaditya (October 7, 1556).²⁸

Second battle of Panipat

In the first week of November, 1556 the armies of Hemu and Akbar met on the historic battlefield of Panipat. In the beginning

25. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Smith, p. 27.

28. Abul Fazl, vol. I, p. 618; *Masir-i-Rahimi*, vol. I, p. 60; Nizam-ud-din, vol. II, p. 31; Badaoni, vol. II, p. 15; Niamtullah (Darn), p. 176; Ahmed Yadgar, pp. 352-53; Abdullah, *Torikh-i-Dandi* (E & D), vol. IV, p. 506.

We have recently come to know of about half a dozen semi-contemporary Rajasthani works which mention Hemu's name in the list of the sovereigns who ruled over Delhi. For details see P. Saran, *Descriptive catalogue of Non-Persian Sources of Medieval Indian History*, pp. 11-16, 19, 25, 37.

Hemu had some reverses. His artillery sent on in advance was captured by the vanguard of Akbar's army in a preliminary engagement. "But even after that loss, the Hindu general still possessed an immense superiority of strength. He relied especially on his 1500 war elephants."²⁹

On November 5, Hemu succeeded in throwing both the right and the left wings of the Mughals into disorder and sought to make his victory decisive by bringing all his elephants to attack on the Mughal centre commanded by Zamankhan.³⁰ What the action was really like can be seen in the following words of Abul Fazl : "Hemu...rode proudly on an elephant named *Hawai* (the rocket?), which was one of his best...He beheld with apprehension the combats of the warriors of fortune's army (Akbar's), and gathering together a band of fierce elephants he showed every stratagem which his powerful capacity could conceive, and every daring deed which lurked in his seditious soul. He made powerful onsets and performed many valorous acts, and dislodged many strenuous soldiers of the sublime army."³¹

Hemu's men fought well. They were more than determined to defeat the enemy. But fate had something else for them in store. "Suddenly in the midst of the contest, an arrow reached Hemu's eye, and piercing the socket, came out at the back of his head....." When Hemu's army saw that arrow had hit Hemu, "the arm of their courage grew slack, and they lost heart. They became handless and footless, and no more girded up the loins of courage. His army was defeated and every man strewed the dust of defeat on his head, and scattered the glory of courage on the ground, and turned to flee. Just then, Shah Quli Khan and some brave men came up to the elephant on which Hemu was riding. He did not know that Hemu was on the elephant, and sought to kill the driver in order that he might make the elephant his spoil.

29. Smith, p. 29.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Abul Fazl, vol. II, p. 64.

The helpless driver, from fear of his life, pointed out to his master. When Shah Quli Khan heard of his great fortune, he blessed his stars and tossed the cap of joy to the skies. He gave quarter to the driver and made him hopeful of a royal reward. He then separated that from some other elephants and left the battlefield."³²

Hemu's Execution

The half-dead Hemu was brought before Akbar from the battle field and he was killed there. Who killed Hemu ? It is a controversial matter. Some historians say that it was Akbar who killed him with his own sword at the instance of his protector, Bairam Khan in order to earn the title of *Ghazi* or slayer of the infidel. The chief exponent of this theory is Vincent Smith. To lend support to his statements, he quotes some seventeenth century writers like Ahmad Yadgar and Van don Broecke.³³ But his theory is in contrast with the accounts of the contemporary writers. Abul Fazl, Nizamuddin, Badauni and a Rajasthani book *Dalpat Vilas*'s writer emphatically say that Akbar refused to oblige his protector and then Bairam Khan and Gada-i-Sheikh, etc., killed Hemu with their hands. Thus we cannot attach importance to the statements of Smith and his seventeenth century supporters.³⁴

Hemu's head was sent to Kabul to be exposed, and his trunk was gibbeted at one of the gates of Delhi.³⁵ The eighty years old father of Hemu was put to death on his refusal to embrace Islam.³⁶ His wife fled away to the jungle of Bajwara and the Mughals failed to arrest her.³⁷

Hemu's place in History

The foregoing discussion shows that Hemu possessed all those qualities of head and heart which make a man great.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

33. See Smith, p. 29.

34. For a detailed discussion, see Dashratha Sharma's paper 'Who Killed Hemu?' *Indian History Congress Proceedings*, 19th Session, pp. 258-60.

35. Abul Fazl, vol. II, pp. 67, 85,

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 71-72.

37. Badaoni, vol. II, p. 10.

Throughout his life, whenever courage, tact and flair for doing the right thing at the right time were required of him, he rose supremely to the occasion. His infinite capacity, matchless foresight, valorous courage, and indefatigable industry have been praised even by his hostile critics like Abul Fazl, etc.³⁸

There is no denying the fact that Hemu was one the greatest generals of his time. He is said to have fought as many as twenty-two battles before the second battle of Panipat and was never a loser. It is not only that he had the talent of getting the best out of his men, but his personal gallantry was also immense. Qanungo is right when he says about him : "No Hindu had ever been covered with so many glorious wounds on the field of battle except Maharana Sanga: no Rajput wielded the sword so bravely against foreign invaders as this humble Hindu of Rewari did on the field of Panipat."³⁹

Hemu was not only a great soldier or a general but he was also an administrator of superb calibre. As seen above, Adil Shah being a drunkard and debauch, had no interest in the affairs of his kingdom. It was Hemu who was the centre of the whole system and the pivot of the whole structure of the government. The direction of every affair lay entirely with him.

In the matter of religion, Hemu was very tolerant. He had firm belief in secularism. Not only that, he had great power to convince even the religious fanatics that secularism was truly a noble thing. How successful was he in this direction can be seen from the fact that even staunch Muslims accepted him as their leader in peace and war. Dr. Satish Chandra is perfectly right in his observation that "if Hemu had remained in power, the close association of Hindus and Muslims brought about by Akbar may

38. Abul Fazl, vol. I, p. 617; vol. II, p. 64. Badaoni Says about Hemu : "By his valour and daring he was victorious and performed great deeds. He became famous for courage and capability....." Quoted by Qanungo, p. 449.

39. Qanungo, p. 449.

have developed much earlier. The alliance of Hemu and Adali should thus be regarded as one of the portents of the future."⁴⁰

To conclude, Hemu was essentially a great man. He played a conspicuous role in the history of India for about three decades as a businessman, a vazir, a general, and above all as a sovereign ruler of Delhi. It is surprising that no biography worthy of this illustrious son of Haryana has been written so far.*

Kirpal Chandra Yadav

40. See his paper entitled 'Hemu—his ancestry and place in history', *Gaurava Garha*, Jaipur, December 1967, p. 8.

*I am thankful to my friend, Shri N.A. Phadke of Benaras for preparing the portrait of Hemu for me.